

Adventuring with God

By Jeanne Hedrick

March, 2007

Political Causes and the Christian

*"So that you may become blameless and pure,
children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation,
in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life."*

Ephesians 2:15-16

If you've had the opportunity to see the new movie out on the life of William Wilberforce, *Amazing Grace*, you likely came away inspired about what a difference one committed person can make. His passionate opposition to the slave trade, once a totally accepted practice among segments of the British population, was at first given little heed. Over time, however, he was able to attract allies in his cause and together they became a voice that would not be stopped. Wilberforce felt strongly led by God to engage in this political battle, which makes us wonder if we might enjoy the same success in other social issues of our time.

In the United States we have swung widely from one side of the spectrum to the other in our views on how Christians should engage the evil in our country. At times we have seen ourselves as a counter-revolutionary movement that is outside of the political arena altogether. From this perspective, the church is seen as most effective when we are aloof from the back-room dealings of popular politics.

More recently we have tried a different tack. Some bravely launched the "moral majority" movement with the intent to "take back" our country from the "godless infidels" who had hijacked our government during the 1960s. It made quite an impact for a short time, but questionable behavior within its own ranks diminished the effectiveness of its so-called moral voice. However, there is still a fairly large representation among evangelical Christians who are in favor of putting pressure on our political parties to nominate people of high moral values to positions of governmental responsibility. They see this strategy as our best means of addressing and changing the moral climate.

But *should* we be involved in trying to effect political change? This is a tough question, considering some of the pitfalls of getting too cozy with the state. We see how detrimental Constantine's embrace of Christianity was to vibrant faith. But then we look at how well Wilberforce did in his day, and we think maybe the risk is worth the results. I have come to believe that there are good points to be made by both sides. There seem to be good reasons for becoming involved in the political arena as well as bad reasons. Our job as Christians becomes that of sorting out which is at play in our hearts and determining our actions accordingly.

What are the *good* reasons for pushing for changes in legislation, even though it is not a permanent solution to the problem of human evil? Here are two that I see as legitimate and within the boundaries of acting scripturally:

1. *Standing up for the rights of someone else who does not have a political voice – being an advocate for them to obtain justice.* This is clearly why Wilberforce got involved in trying to stop the slave trade. He was not a slave himself and he did not have any family members who were. In other words, this action did not benefit him directly. Instead, he acted consistently with Christ's example of laying down His life for others at great personal cost to himself.
2. *Stemming the tide of social evil as a means of making our society better for everyone.* John Wesley recognized that evil is not just private and personal; sin can also be public and institutional. So he thought it valuable and legitimate for Christians to combat societal evils in order to preserve a moral decency for everyone who has to live in the community. To be a social reformer is

a most unpopular stance, especially in today's permissive culture. But Scripture does enjoin a collective consciousness when Paul tells the spiritually strong to be sensitive to the needs of the weak in their midst. "Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself" (Romans 15:2-3). In other words, our spiritual life does not begin and end with how well we are doing individually; we are in this together. And we display our identification with Jesus best when we are concerned for the welfare of others.

So what are the *wrong* reasons for getting involved in politics as a Christian? Here are two that I have observed far too often in our country in recent years:

1. *Pushing for legislation that will primarily benefit us (Christians).* To recognize this as our motivation requires a strong desire for honesty. It's hard to admit that at the core of our efforts to stem the tide of immoral practices is the less than noble motive of trying to make it easier for us to live as Christians in our culture. If I want to see things changed in society so that it becomes easier for me to live my life as a biblical Christian, that's not consistent with what Jesus taught. Swimming upstream is what His followers have always done. Why should I insist on it being easy for me and my kids (or grandkids) to stand up for Him?
2. *Using government to gain power in the same way that other lobby groups seek to influence public policy.* If we are tired of the "left-wing radicals" pushing us

around as evangelical Christians, and we want to push back in kind to gain some "respect" from them. . . that is probably not the best reason to get involved in politics. Power that is gained at the expense of someone else is worldly power, not the kind of spiritual power that Jesus exemplified. We can persuade, but Scripture does not give us license to set up a Christian city state that dictates how others will live. *.or else.*

There are some of us that have been gifted, as Wilberforce was, to influence others for good. Not all of us will be effective in the political arena, but for those who have the interest and skills to make a difference there, we should be glad. Our societies will never be perfectly just or compassionate until Jesus comes to set up His rule. But they can be better than they currently are. . .and our job as His representatives is to see where and how we can best bring about change – not for our benefit necessarily, but for the good of all others whose lives we touch.

Jesus has already given us our job description in the world. Let's keep this in mind as we find ways to intersect with the politics of our time.

"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

(Matthew 5:14-16).